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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the scholarly volume, "I Sing for I Cannot Be Silent: The Feminization of American Hymnody, 1870-1920" (June Hadden Hobbs). The book is a multilayered representation and reflection of both a particular textual community and of that community's cultural notions of gender and power. The volume uses a rhetorical methodology that includes the frameworks of orality and of feminist interpretations of women's views of textuality, reappropriation of cultural texts, and social construction of gender. This methodology is informed with the histories of hymnody, contemporary sentimental novels, theology, women's study clubs, and evangelical church life in the United States, and as such, contributes an important and powerful historical understanding of another way in which women have refused to be silent. Women's hymn-writing was acceptable to a society and to a church culture that did not permit women to speak publicly or preach or teach in mixed groups, but did allow them to sing. The paper notes the power with which rhetorical strategies by women hymn-writers encoded both the religious beliefs and practices of evangelical Christianity. (BT)

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"I Sing for I Cannot Be Silent": The Feminization of American Hymnody, 1870-1920.

A Book Review

Cynthia Mahaffey

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Cynthia Mahaffey
Unpublished book review
1999

Hobbs, June Hadden. "I Sing For I Cannot Be Silent": The Feminization of American Hymnody, 1870-1920. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997. 220 pgs.

June Hadden Hobbs constructs here a careful, scholarly, and "insider's" argument for the understanding of American gospel hymnody from 1870-1920 as a multilayered representation and reflection of both a particular textual community and of that community's cultural notions of gender and power. Hobbs examines the ways in which women constructed avenues, within the intertwined constraints of evangelical Christianity and of patriarchy, for speaking, writing, and creating her own forms of public address and spirituality. In "I Sing for I Cannot Be Silent", Hobbs employs a rhetorical methodology that includes the frameworks of orality and of feminist interpretations of women's views of textuality, reappropriation of cultural texts, and social construction of gender. She informs this methodology with the histories of hymnody, contemporary "sentimental" novels, theology, women's study clubs, and American evangelical church life, and in doing so, contributes an important and powerful historical understanding of another way in which women have refused to "be silent."

Hobbs situates herself as one who grew up in what she terms the "textual community" of evangelical Christianity. Her acknowledgement of this stance is important to the complex and rich levels of the book's rhetorical and historical scholarship, and, at the same time, her position as an "insider" may complicate for some readers a clear understanding of the argument at stake. I must say, at this point, that I too, am an "insider"—I, too, was born into evangelical Christianity and was raised, like

Hobbs, with an intimate knowledge of this hymnody as well as of the history of the issues of American fundamentalism. Because my background so closely mirrors Hobbs' own, I am unsure what understandings readers without these intimate familiarities will bring away from her discussion—I simply don't have the intellectual distance to judge. That said, I should emphasize, at the same time, that Hobbs prepares a very careful and clear history of these issues to build her argument. I place this caveat here, at the beginning of this review, to clarify my own stance, not to imply anything about the clarity of Hobbs' discussion, (nor about the very considerable abilities of this book's readers).

She very clearly proposes Walter Ong's premises about orality as a frame for understanding the ways in which women's hymn-writing was acceptable to a society and to a church culture which did not permit women to speak publicly, to preach, or teach in mixed groups of men and women, but **did** allow them to sing. Some of these features of orality—that the words used are "aggregative rather than analytic", "copious," create "homeostasis" by supporting an "invented tradition", and are "participatory"—mirror patriarchal ideas of the time that women's words were (and should be) emotional rather than rational, spoken out of personal experience which was synonymous with the "sphere of the home," and accessible to all, as a mother "should" be (71-74). Hobbs supports this reading by drawing parallels between the historical constructs of women demanded by the "Cult of Domesticity" and by evangelical Christian doctrine. Women could use the commonly held cultural texts of the King James Bible and of the commonplaces of Christian doctrine to express, in Hobb's words, a "feminized" vision of Christian spirituality (76).

Her discussion of the writing and performance of hymns by women as a separation from the concerns of men is reminiscent of the work of Ann Ruggles Gere and Laura Jane Roop's in intertextuality in women's study clubs, though Hobbs does not mention this or other of Gere's earlier work—an important omission, to my mind, since Hobbs does mention these clubs. Instead, Hobbs draws on a late nineteenth century history of women's clubs, and on primary materials of women's missionary societies of the time. These primary texts are crucial to her argument—I just feel her feminist reading would be bolstered by reference to Gere's and Roop's scholarship. Hobbs notes how middle-class women formed "alliances with evangelical ministers" during this time to forward the work of missionary societies, and how women's experiences with administration and the management of money began to extend to an understanding of "spirituality in their own terms and a separate Christianity from that of fathers, brothers, son" (31). Women hymn-writers incorporated that "spirituality in their own terms" by, first, writing hymns for children in Sunday schools (the only venue in which such authorship was acceptable). Eventually, from this very private sphere, songs were published in hymnbooks, and then sung in churches, very public arenas. Likewise, women's study clubs of the time also began to develop, note Gere and Roop, a separate understanding of how writing could be used to forward their ideas and concerns, from the safety of these clubs' relatively private (from men) contexts.

Hobbs rightly emphasizes the power with which these rhetorical strategies by women hymn-writers encoded both the religious beliefs and practices of evangelical Christianity. As she points out, in a church tradition which prides itself on the "absence" of liturgy and formality, gospel hymns "preserved procedural knowledge" which set

evangelical Christianity apart from earlier expressions of more formal brands of Christianity. At the same time, women hymn-writers used the words of their songs to testify, to speak, and to address their specific social concerns, their visions of God and of their own spirituality, and of their lives as women in one of the only ways they knew they would be heard.

"I Sing For I Cannot Be Silent" is a significant and clearly written piece of scholarship and will be important to students of feminist rhetoric, American hymnody, and church history. Perhaps Hobb's "insider" view offers what only an insider can—the necessary recovery of our foremothers' efforts to speak with their own voices, to claim their (and our) birthright to take their (our) place in rhetorical history.

Work Cited

Gere, Anne Ruggles and Laura Jane Roop. "For Profit and Pleasure: Collaboration in Nineteenth Century Women's Literary Clubs." New Visions of Collaborative Writing. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1992:1-18.

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